



Young Adult Literature: Positive Young Adult Novels

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Positive Young Adult Novels

Dick Abrahamson and Betty Carter

Why are all those teen books so pessimistic? That's the one criticism we hear most often about adolescent literature. While knowledgeable teachers can point to YA books presenting positive characters and stories, still, a large number of YA books are "the new realism"—problem novels that focus on everything from unwanted pregnancy to alcoholism to child abuse and murder. Readers are left with pictures of troubled teens living in a negative adult world and stories that end with little hope. Indeed, many critics argue that the success of the current, formula, romance stories is a reaction to the negativism of these problem novels. The books in this column are positive young adult novels that present neither saccharine romances nor pessimistic treatises on the evils of the world.

IOU's, Ouida Sebestyen. Atlantic-Little Brown, 1982, 188 pp. \$10.95. Jr. High and up.

The author of *Words by Heart* and *Far from Home* has hit the bull's-eye again with this beautifully drawn portrait of mutual love between thirteen-year-old Stowe Garrett and his mother, Annie. Annie's been hurt by two men in her life, and Stowe wants to make it up to her with some long overdue IOU's. Annie's father disowned her for marrying Stowe's father, and then Stowe's father deserted Annie. She's managed to raise her son by taking care of other people's children. There's not much money in the Garrett household, but there is mutual respect, a genuine concern for each other, and Annie's infectious, positive attitude toward life.

When a relative calls Stowe to tell him that his grandfather is dying and wants to see him but not Annie, Stowe is angered at the pain the grandfather has caused and the new pain Annie will feel if he tells her. He tries to hide the call and the knowledge of his grandfather's illness. Eventually, however, the two make the pilgrimage to grandfather's deathbed, and it's here in the presence of their extended family that mother and

son work out their individual problems about fathers, family, independence, and happiness.

As in her other books, the strength of *IOU's* is in the character development and the relationships among the characters. Although they are quite different books, *IOU's* raises some of the same questions about family that Sue Ellen Bridgers tackles in *Home Before Dark*.

The Truth about Fathers, Mary Ann Gray. Bradbury Press, 1982, 210 pp. \$9.95. Jr. High and up.

Gail Sheehy dealt with adult mid-life crisis in *Passages*. More recently, William Appleton has written about the fragile but powerful relationship between fathers and daughters in his bestseller *Fathers and Daughters*. Both of these topics form the focus of Mary Ann Gray's first YA novel.

Stevie and her family have moved from one college town to another as her English professor father searched for something. Although each town meant a new school and new friends, Stevie didn't mind because her father was always there with support and love and laughter to make everything okay. She loved her mom and her brother, but Dad was Stevie's best friend.

No one but Dad was very happy when he left his job at the University of Wisconsin to return them all to a "simpler" life in his boyhood town of Livingston, Michigan. During that summer of Stevie's fourteenth year, she watches her father change from her best friend to her enemy. As Dad grapples with his own mid-life crisis and the increasingly obvious truth that you can't go home again, he takes out his frustration on his daughter. Stevie is going through some parallel changes of her own. She's maturing. She falls in love with Brian. She's faced with the pressures of dating and sex and small town gossip. Father and daughter are on a collision course.

When Stevie and her father finally collide, they both change. Dad has grown up for a second time, and his daughter has grown enough to see her idol with warts and all. Gray does a wonderful job paralleling the effects of Dad's crisis on his daughter and the effects of her growing up on him.

Journey Inward, Jean Craighead George. Dutton, 1982, 244 pp. \$13.50. Sr. High.

Jean George's new book is neither an adolescent novel nor a piece of fiction. It is a fine autobiography by the author of *Julie of the Wolves* and *My Side of the Mountain*. This book offers older teenagers and teachers a personal, sensitive look at the woman behind the books.

Jean George's autobiography is the story of a woman in love with nature. It's the story of raising children in homes crowded with owls and snakes and publisher's deadlines. George talks about her failed marriage and the pressures of raising three children as a single parent.

Her story is very much a look at the maturation of a writer. We watch her move from being a coauthor with her husband to becoming the self-confident writer who makes enough money to support a family. She talks about how important winning the Newbery Award was to her and how calmly she received the congratulatory phone call. After the call she writes, "I opened the refrigerator door for ice. There on the second shelf, lay the book I had been reading before the phone rang. On the kitchen table sat a plate of what I had thought were cookies when I offered them to a neighbor. They were dog biscuits. It appeared that I had not taken the news as calmly as I had imagined."

In total, *Journey Inward* provides readers with an intimate glimpse into the life of an author who has spent her career writing quality literature for children and adolescents.

Wings and Roots, Susan Terris. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982, 186 pp. \$9.95. Jr. High and up.

We need more teen love stories of this kind. Kit Hayden, former rock-climber and current victim of polio, meets Jeannie West, a volunteer in the post-polio ward at Hanover Hospital. It's the 1950s and Kit and the others in the ward have just missed out on the recently discovered Salk vaccine. That knowledge makes Kit more bitter and makes the question, "Why me?" that much tougher to answer.

The relationship between Kit and Jeannie is often one of harsh words and confrontations that develop into mutual caring. In this character study, Jeannie represents roots. She's sensitive, guarded, her strength is inward. Kit is wings. He wants to soar like a bird, regain the use of his leg, and conquer new mountains as a climber. In the course of the book, each teenager learns something from the other. They grow to realize that both wings and roots are important parts of who we are.

As Kit and Jeannie mature in the novel, their deepest emotions are reflected in the poetry they write. Poetry is used both as a vehicle for communication between them and also as a way of working out their own answers to the global questions we all contemplate. *Wings and Roots* is a poetic character study of two teenagers who help each other grow up.

Temporary Times, Temporary Places, Barbara Robinson. Harper & Row, 1982, 113 pp. \$8.25. Jr. High.

In this nicely crafted romance, fifteen-year-old Janet directs all her energies toward orchestrating chance encounters with Eddie Walsh, a boy who could "point his finger in any direction, anywhere in town, and pick his lady." Her wildest dreams are realized when one Sunday night he mumbles, "Come on, I'll walk you home." From then on, they are a couple, and Janet's idyllic summer is perfectly wrapped in the security of being Eddie's girl.

All ends, not with September, but rather with a bad case of poison ivy. Unable to face Eddie with her bumps, splotches, and calamine lotion, Janet secludes herself while Eddie drifts into another relationship. When they again see each other, Eddie awkwardly avoids her and Janet is too unsure of herself to make any overtures. Although dejected, she finally discovers the futility of defining herself in terms of one male and begins to anticipate other, more mature, loves and changes in her life.

In contrast, Janet's forty-year-old Aunt May who has spent the summer recovering from a broken heart does not seem to have learned any of the lessons life taught Janet during her fifteenth summer. Janet's inability to understand her aunt gradually changes as she learns that everything isn't always perfect and being an adult can be as difficult as becoming one.



Journey to an 800 Number, E.L. Konigsburg. Atheneum, 1982, 138 pp. \$9.95. Jr. High and up.

When the mother of Maximillian Stubbs remarries and leaves for an extended honeymoon, Max takes his prep school blazer, fifty dollars from her new husband, and a lot of superiority to Similax, Texas to stay with his father, Woody, the camel keeper. Father, son, and camel move through the midwest stopping at various convention spots and tourist attractions where Woody makes a living exhibiting and selling rides on his camel.

Although a fragile relationship develops between father and son, Max is not able to accept this simple and embarrassing lifestyle nor understand Woody's deep affection for people who, in Max's eyes, have no class or style. Shocked into realization that he, a prep school

educated young man, and his mother, the present Mrs. F. Hugo Malatesta I, were once the needy recipients of Woody's unencumbered love, Max begins to separate the outward, lavish trappings of class from the simple meaning of the word.

Max's transformation is believable because he is not really pretentious but rather the victim of his mother's one track expectations. *Journey* is Konigsburg at her perceptive, humorous, memorable best.

I'll Always Remember You . . . Maybe, Stella Pevsner. Clarion Books, 1982, 181 pp. \$9.95. Sr. High.

The subject of breaking up in order to find out who you are is explored for older readers in this book. Darien is crushed when her longtime boyfriend, Paul, decides they should date others while he's away at college. She doesn't want to be with anyone else and consequently devotes the first half of her senior year to remembering the good times with Paul and waiting for his infrequent calls and letters.

A short Thanksgiving visit is unsatisfactory and she

resolves that Christmas break will be better. When, during the holidays, she and Paul make love, Darien assumes that all is as it was and is unprepared for his final rejection. Reluctantly, she makes adjustments and discovers her own strengths and talents as she begins to think of a future without Paul at the center. She starts dating another boy but refuses to shape herself according to his expectations and continues her own tentative steps toward independence.

Darien's pain accurately mirrors the emotional confusion and uncertainty that accompanies adolescent heartbreak. Unfortunately, her realization that she must control her own life comes through a superficial encounter session which mars an otherwise fine novel. Both Darien and Paul are complex characters, and Pevsner's deft treatment of the serious emotional commitment involved in teenage sex is well handled.

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Revision

I was your essay on love
Until you left me dangling
Like a participle
Misplaced and awkward
It was only then that I
Began to realize it had
Been faulty coordination
All along.
Your empty sentences
Spinning in my mind,
Leading me nowhere,
Had not been keeping to the point.
You were writing on other
Subjects.
No doubt,
It was time
For Revision.
So you marked me
Like a well-meaning
English teacher
and left me
bleeding.

Charlotte Pritt
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